

Let's Understand

ISLAM

What is Islam?

Islam is not a new religion, but the same truth that God (Allah) revealed through all His Prophets to every people. For a fifth of the world's population, Islam is both a religion and a complete way of life. Muslims follow a religion of peace, mercy, and forgiveness and the majority have nothing to do with the extremely grave events which have come to be associated with their faith.

What does Islam mean?

The Arabic word 'Islam' simply means 'submission', and derives from a word meaning 'peace'. In a religious context it means complete submission to the will of God. 'Mohammedanism' is thus a misnomer because it suggests that Muslims worship Muhammad (pbuh) rather than God. 'Allah' is the Arabic name of God, which is used by Arab Muslims and Christians alike.

Who is Muhammad (pbuh)?

Muhammad (pbuh) was born in Makkah in the year 570, at a time when Christianity was not yet fully established in Europe. Since his father died before his birth, and his mother shortly afterwards, he was raised by his uncle from the respected tribe of Ouraysh. As he grew up, he became known for his truthfulness, generosity and sincerity, so that he was sought after for his ability to arbitrate in disputes. The historians describe him as calm and meditative.

Muhammad (pbuh) was of a deeply religious nature, and had long detested the decadence of his society. It became his habit to meditate from time to time in the Cave of Hira near the summit of Jabal al-Nur, the 'Mountain of Light' near Makkah.

How did he become a Prophet and A Messenger of Allah?

At the age of 40, while engaged in a meditative retreat, Muhammad (pbuh) received his first revelation from the Angel Gabriel. This revelation, which continued for twenty-three years, is known as the Qur'an.

As soon as he began to recite the words he heard from Gabriel, and to preach the truth which God had revealed to him, he and his small group of followers suffered bitter persecution, which grew so fierce that in the year 622, God gave them the command to emigrate. This event, the Hijra, 'migration', in which they left Makkah for the city of Madinah some 260 miles to the north, marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

After several years, the Prophet (pbuh) and his followers were able to return to Makkah, where they forgave their enemies and established Islam definitively. Before the Prophet (pbuh) died at the age of 63, the greater part of Arabia was Muslim, and within a century of his death Islam had spread to Spain in the West and as far East as China.

Who are the Muslims?

Over one billion people from a vast range of races, nationalities and cultures across the globe - from the southern Philippines to Nigeria - are united by the common Islamic faith. About 18% live in the Arab world; the world's largest Muslim community is in Indonesia; substantial parts of Asia and most of Africa's population is Muslim, while significant minorities are to be found in the Soviet Union, China, North and South America, and Europe.

What do Muslims believe?

Muslims believe in One, Unique, Incomparable God; in the Angels created by Him; in the Prophets through whom His revelations were brought to mankind; in the Day of Judgment and individual accountability for actions; in God's complete authority of human destiny and in life after death. Muslims believe in a chain of Prophets starting with Adam and including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Issac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elias, Jonah, John the Baptist, and Jesus, peace be upon them. But God's final message to man, a reconfirmation of the eternal message and a summing-up of all that has gone before was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) through Angel Gabriel

How does someone become a Muslim?

Simply by saying 'there is no god apart from God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.' By this declaration the believer announces his or her faith in all of God's Messengers and the scriptures they brought.

Why does Islam often seem strange?

Islam may seem exotic or even extreme in the modern world. Perhaps this is because religion does not dominate everyday life in the West today, whereas Muslims have religion always uppermost in their minds, and make no division between secular and sacred. They believe that the Divine Law, the Shariah, should be taken very seriously, which is why issues related to religion are still so important.

Does Islam and Christianity have different origins?

No. Together with Judaism, they go back to the Prophet Abraham, and their three Prophets are directly descended from his sons - Muhammad (pbuh) from the eldest Ishmael, and Moses and Jesus from Issac, peace be upon them. Abraham established the settlement which today is the city of Makkah, and built the Ka'ba towards which all Muslims turn when they pray.

Moments in American Muslim History

1539: Moroccan guide Estephan participated in the exploration of Arizona and New Mexico for the viceroy of New Spain.

1717: Arrival in North America of "Arabic-speaking slaves."

1900: Earliest recorded Muslim group to organize for communal prayers, in Ross, North Dakota.

1934: First building designated as Mosque, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

1952: Muslim servicemen allowed to identify their religion as Muslim by the Federal government.

Muslim Americans

Population: Estimates vary, but *The New York Times* figure of 6 million seems realistic. (*The New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1989)

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